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ABSTRACT

The project described is part of a followup to the Swedish university reform of 1977, of which the emphasis on work experience is a central feature. The purpose is to document Swedish and other nations' conditions for using work experience in some college curricula. Theoretical background for the study is described, treating work experience not as a resource in itself but rather most useful when related to a curriculum. The interrelationship of work, study skills, and critical thinking is discussed. It is felt that the prevailing concept of adult education does not adequately incorporate critical thinking and information assimilation. The project is scheduled to work from January 1980 through June 1981. The first phase consists of compilation of documentation and the development of instruments for case studies. Phase two consists of the examination of a number of courses of study. Phase three is for analysis of the case studies and examination of international experiences in this area. In phase four, three courses of study are looked at in depth. The final phase is dedicated to developing a final report. A brief list of references is included. (MSE)

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CURRENT PROJECT

TITLE OF PROJECT: WORK EXPERIENCE AS A RESOURCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

IN PROGRESS AT: R & D unit
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BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

The project forms part of the NBUC's follow-up of the higher education reform of 1977. In the first place the purpose is to elucidate by means of case studies and documentation of Swedish and international studies the conditions for making use of students' work experience in some study programmes in higher education. The project work is being carried out in collaboration with the project 'The adaptation of universities and colleges to recurrent education' at the Department of Educational Research, Stockholm Institute of Education. The project has, in addition, close links with the NBUC's project on access and some local projects emphasizing new student groups, work experience, and pedagogics of higher education.

The emphasis on work experience is a central feature of the Swedish reform of higher education. There are several motives for this and the arguments concerning adult students and young students have been different. For the adult group occupational experience was initially seen as a knowledge resource;

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a resource which could in some sense be regarded as being interchangeable with theoretical background knowledge. For instance, the Swedish Commission on Eligibility to Higher Education wrote as follows in its principal report (Routes to Higher Education, SOU 1970:21, p 186) 'Undoubtedly there ought also to exist among somewhat older adults considerable groups of people who both feel the need of and have potential qualifications for a higher education' or a bit further down the same page 'Nevertheless many have acquired in occupational, voluntary or other activity knowledge and experience which can constitute a good basis for higher studies'.

Where the young group was concerned the argument concerning interchangeability was not central. Instead work experience was seen as an important complement to grades and study aptitude tests. The purpose here was to break the young students' theoretical isolation and better equip them for understanding and working at the cognitive content of their studies. 'Gaining such experience before theoretical studies must be regarded as valuable, since the students are given in this way the possibility of placing the theoretical knowledge they acquire in a broader context more readily than students without this experience' (SOU 1970:21, p 220). Work experience has two functions in the admission system. First, it gives general eligibility for higher studies for students with insufficient formal schooling. Second, it functions as an additional selection criterion for young students. It seems reasonable that these two functions have different consequences where the utilization of work experience is concerned.

A typical feature of the Swedish reform is that, with certain exceptions, no special requirements concerning the content of the work experience have been set up. The only thing that counts is how long one has worked. Here is, thus, an interesting difference in relation to the North American attempts to give 'credits for life experience'. The ambition there is to develop methods for determining the content and functional level of the students' background of experience with the purpose of finding clear links with given study programmes or courses. The attempts have shown that determining the content of work experience with regard to both knowledge and study skill is a delicate task. In the light of this it is even more interesting to analyze the pedagogical conditions for making use of work experience in an education system characterized by central admission and the lack of a definition of the experience in terms of content.

There are, moreover, a number of additional motives for the project:

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- today an intensive debate is in progress concerning how the new groups of students are getting on in higher education; there is reason to complement studies already in progress in order to provide a clearer foundation for this debate.

- the increasingly heterogeneous student groups confront the pedagogics of the higher education sector with new demands; there is, therefore, reason to illuminate with policy-related and empirical points of departure how and under what conditions the pedagogics can be adapted to these new demands and circumstances.

- the emphasis on work experience is one of several important features of the reform package of 1977, it is an interesting example of policy implementation, as it contains a conflict between an academic cognitive tradition and a tradition which is founded on experience-related learning.

- there is today relatively extensive international research into the adaptation of higher education to new and more heterogeneous student groups; the project can therefore become a platform for improved international contacts in this particular area.

Even if work experience is an interesting and challenging educational concept it has its limitations nonetheless. The concept cannot be studied in isolation from either goals and conditions in higher education or the conditions in society and in working life which characterize the students' everyday life. Consequently the expectations on the project must not be exaggerated. The purpose is not the achievement of a systematic and comprehensive picture. The intention is instead to bring certain questions into public debate by means of elucidations and case studies combined with theoretical analyses.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND ISSUES

A sketch of the theoretical background for the project is given in a report by Abrahamsson, Kim and Rubenson (1979) to UNESCO on the theme 'The value of work experience in higher education'. The report gave a background to the concept of work experience and placed special stress on the Swedish experience of the experiment with widened access to higher education (the 25:5 rule) and the widened application made in the reform of higher education (the 25:4 rule). In a concluding chapter a theoretically founded analysis is made of the effects of work experience on the pedagogical process. In our analysis we modified slightly Edholm's (1978) analyse of the concept of work experience.

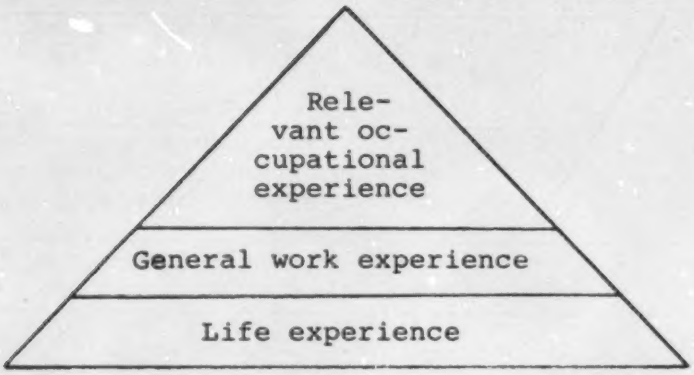

Figure 1. A model for work and life experience.

When we want to link certain experience to a subject content it is important to elucidate the character of the experience. Is it a question of experience relevant to the education? Or do we mean general work experience? Or is it primarily life experience as such we have in mind? Regardless of what definition is made, it is obvious that the learning environment differs a very great deal between different occupations and life-roles. It is also important to stress that the changes in working life brought about by specialization, computerization, and division of knowledge have changed significantly the conditions for employees development of experience at work. Even if we often invest the concept of work experience with a positive value, all experience is not good. Dewey writes thought-provokingly about this in his book 'Experience and Education':

> 'The belief that all genuine education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative. Experience and education cannot be directly equated to each other. For some experiences are mis-educative. Any experience is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience. An experience may be such as to engender callousness; It may produce lack of sensitivity and of responsiveness. Then the possibilities of having richer experience in the future are restricted.'
>
> Dewey, 1971, pp 25-26

Work experience cannot thus be regarded as a resource in itself, but must be related to the knowledge content of a particular education. The problem can be illustrated by means of the following figure:

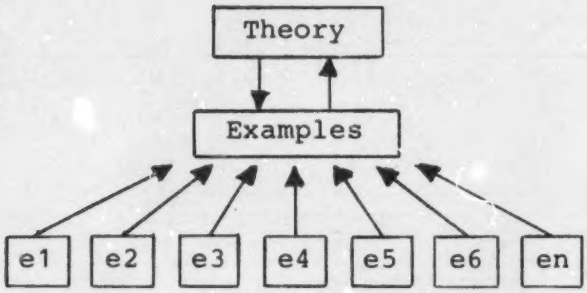

Figure 2. The interplay between theory, examples, and experience.

In the teaching process the teacher is the bearer of theories and examples to illustrate the theories. The teacher's task is not simply to elucidate the content and logical coherence of the theory. Preferably he will also indicate the theory's application in practice. He can, however, choose more or less fictitious examples to illustrate his thesis. The more isolated the teacher himself is, the greater is the risk that the examples are fictitious or special. If he meets in this situation a group of students who perceive themselves as the bearers of more relevant examples a confrontation arises. From the students' pool of personal experiences a new more fruitful example can be created, an example which can in turn give rise to a more dynamic relation between theory and practice.

This favourable situation chiefly arises when the students have a relatively homogeneous background of experience, which can be put together like the pieces in a jig-saw puzzle. If instead their backgrounds of experience are increasingly unclear and heterogeneous, the students' knowledge cannot be used in the same way. Using work experience in the instruction need not, however, mean that all students' experience is always to be used. It can suffice if, for instance, one student contributes an important aspect which others can then also share. Analyses of experience as a resource in higher education ought therefore also to pay attention to how students are given by virtue of the knowledge of higher education better tools and conceptual models for analyzing their own experience and thereby increasing their own self-knowledge.

Alongside subject content and cognitive traditions working methods have an important function in using experience. We can imagine a scale from under-structured working or teaching methods. In the first type of method the students themselves are given con-

siderable opportunities to steer their own learning in project work or self-study. The other type of method is characterized by the different learning stages being clearly indicated and arranged step by step so that one stage must be completed before the next can be commenced.

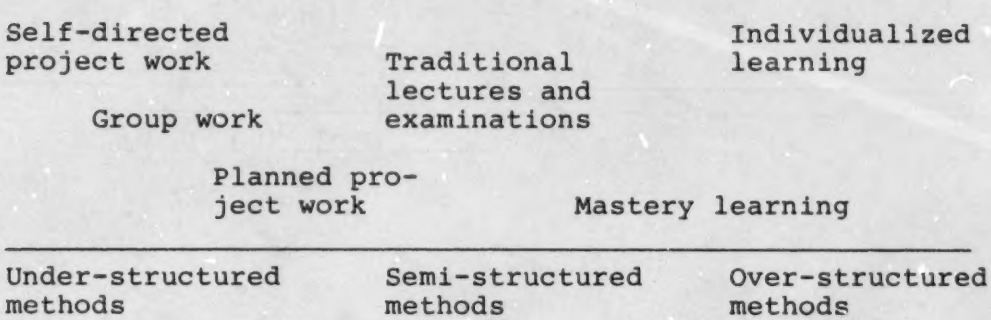

Figure 3. An overview of different teaching methods.

It is undoubtedly the case that the over-structured methods give very limited opportunities of using work experience. In a system for distance teaching where studies are largely a lone process of give and take with a study material, the opportunities for using work experience are very limited. On the other hand self-directed project work ought to be able to offer good opportunities to use the students' experience. Excessively rigid pedagogical methods create obstacles to the use of experience. In the light of this it is interesting to study Cross' (1976) pedagogical prescription for new student groups:

> 'The research to date indicates that a promising approach to working with New Students would be to design clear, strongly structured learning tasks that can be pursued jointly by several students or by groups of students working together towards common learning goals. The clear delineation of the task plus the social support of other people seems to be a potentially powerful combination of forces for field dependents.'
>
> Cross 1976, p 131

The quotation leads us naturally on to a closely related problem, namely to what extent work experience can be seen as a study skill in higher education. In the above-mentioned UNESCO report we emphasize that no general interchangeability of background knowledge and work experience can be considered to exist, least of all in situations where work experience is not qualified in any way with regard to content and functional level. An important problem area is therefore the elucidation of the resource features of work experience with regard to study skill. This is particularly important in light of the fact that adult students with inadequate study skill often seem to have difficulty compensating for inadequate learning in the classroom with self-

study. In that way the new student groups may be transformed from resource students to risk students (Abrahamsson, 1979).

Group-oriented components in studies are a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for being able to make use of experience. Nor can the goal be to use the experience as such; on the contrary it should be to create situations where the links between the experience and the subject knowledge are most constructive. We are, here, confronted with a difficult problem of criteria and balance concerning the development of a learning environment which can promote such an interplay. The demands on the teacher's or supervisor's sensitivity to such links between experience and subject knowledge create completely different didactic problems from those created in a situation when the transmission of subject knowledge alone comes into focus. An analysis of the possibilities of making use of work experience in various courses of study cannot therefore be carried out independently of how the frequency of teaching contact has developed on the study programmes in question.

Yet another problem concerns the link between experience-based learning and the critical thinking which ought to mark a higher education. Today we know relatively little about the interplay of experience, study skill, and critical thinking. Is experience favourable for critical thinking? Or is it the case that experience is a drawback where the ability to function according to traditional academic principles is concerned? The question is not easily answered, but illustrates a current collision of ideas between a generally benevolent adult education view of knowledge (of the experiential learning type) and a view of knowledge stressing critical understanding of theories and models (information assimilation model).

The problems indicated above are difficult in terms both of content and research methodology. A specially hard methodological problem concerns attempts to identify what is contained in the concept experience. By definition it is a type of knowledge not having the same characteristics as academic knowledge. It has more to do with a familiarity with and skills in certain areas and a sort of latent conceptual model.

The analysis presented above will be a general starting-point for case-studies in various courses of study. It is still to early to choose appropriate courses of study, but conceivable alternatives would be the pre-school teacher study programmes (it offers special possibilities of comparing students with and without work experience), a study programme

for nurses, and a study programme in the technical sector. The case-studies of teaching on some courses of study ought to be carried out with as few pre-conceptions as possible concerning theoretical points of departure and assumptions. The investigative technique should be developed and refined in close contact with teachers and students on some courses of study where work experience can be assumed to have a particularly critical function.

DISPOSITION AND TIME SCHEDULE

The project will work from 1st January 1980 to the end of June 1981. So the final report could be made in the spring of 1981 and the main part of the investigative work could be carried out during 1980. This time schedule agrees on the whole with the main project's general disposition, which makes a link possible in the final report. The design is broadly:

1) Initial phase (Jan -- Feb 1980)

Compilation of previous studies, location and review of policy documents, discussions and seminars on the disposition of the project (e.g. choice of study programmes of study) and development of instruments for case studies.

2) Case studies I (critical incident, Feb -- April, 1980)

In collaboration with university teachers an intensive study is carried out during Feb - April with teachers/students on obstacles/possibilities in the use of work experience in teaching. The study focuses on a selection of courses of study and is carried out with a selective survey technique and by means of a limited number of in-depth interviews. A workshop on conceptual and methodological problems was performed in mid-February.

3) Theoretical link-up and documentation of international work (Apr -- June 1980)

The experience from the critical incident study should be analyzed and discussed with reference to international experience. Preliminarily it is intended that the project could be aired at a couple of conferences in the USA and Canada during May 1980. In connection with this there are good opportunities to follow the international discussion concerning 'experiential learning, credits for life experiences and methods for the assessment of knowledge and skills based on experiential learning'.

4) Case studies II (Autumn 1980)

The purpose of this phase is to follow closely three courses of study in collaboration with local research

leaders and through process studies in order to elucidate how work experience is used in teaching and to illuminate learning problems in heterogeneous student groups where demands on knowledge acquisition and concept understanding can vary in different ways.

5) Tie-up and report (Spring 1981)

The intention is that each phase be reported in unpretentious working reports to be subsequently brought together in a final report.

Kenneth Abrahamsson

1980-02-15

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